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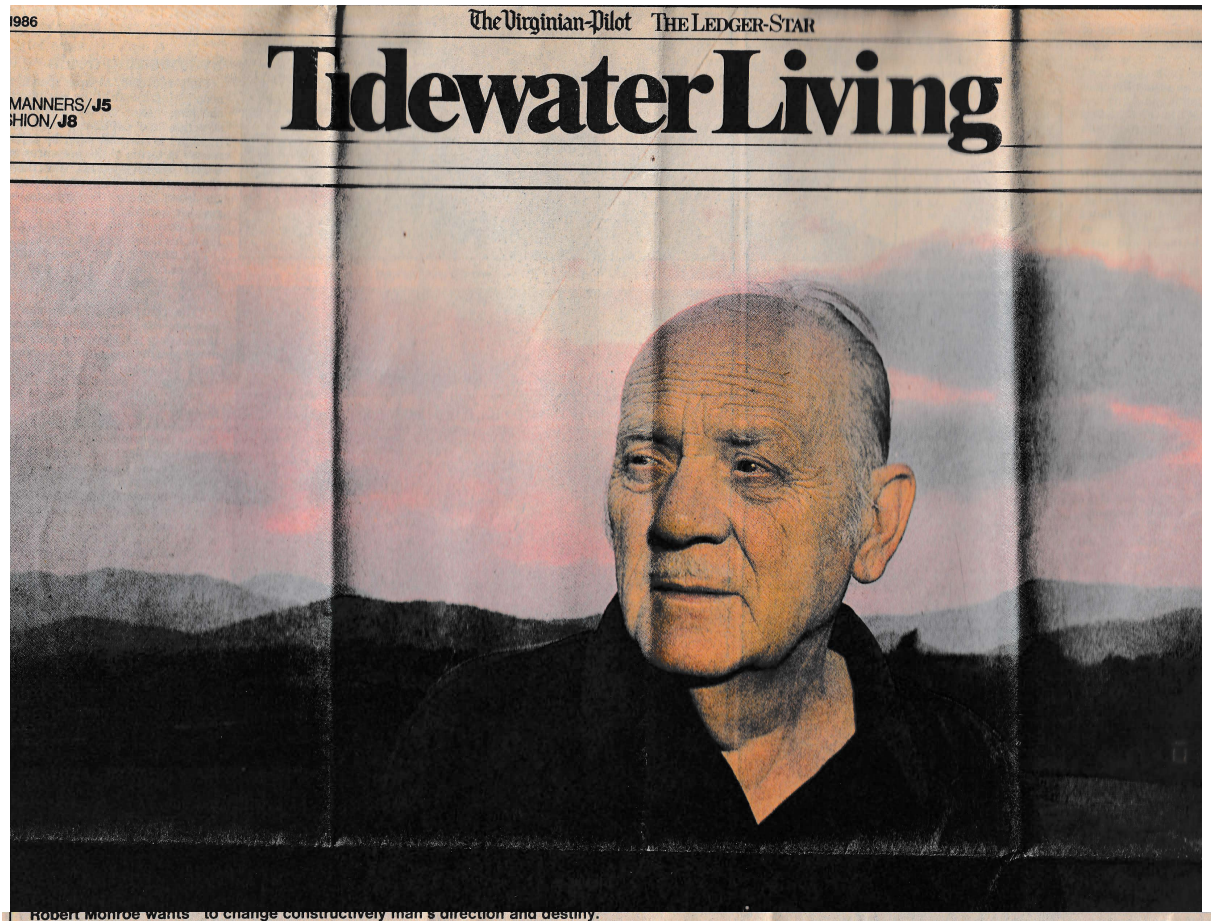
Tidewater Living

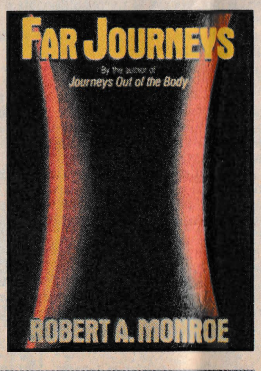


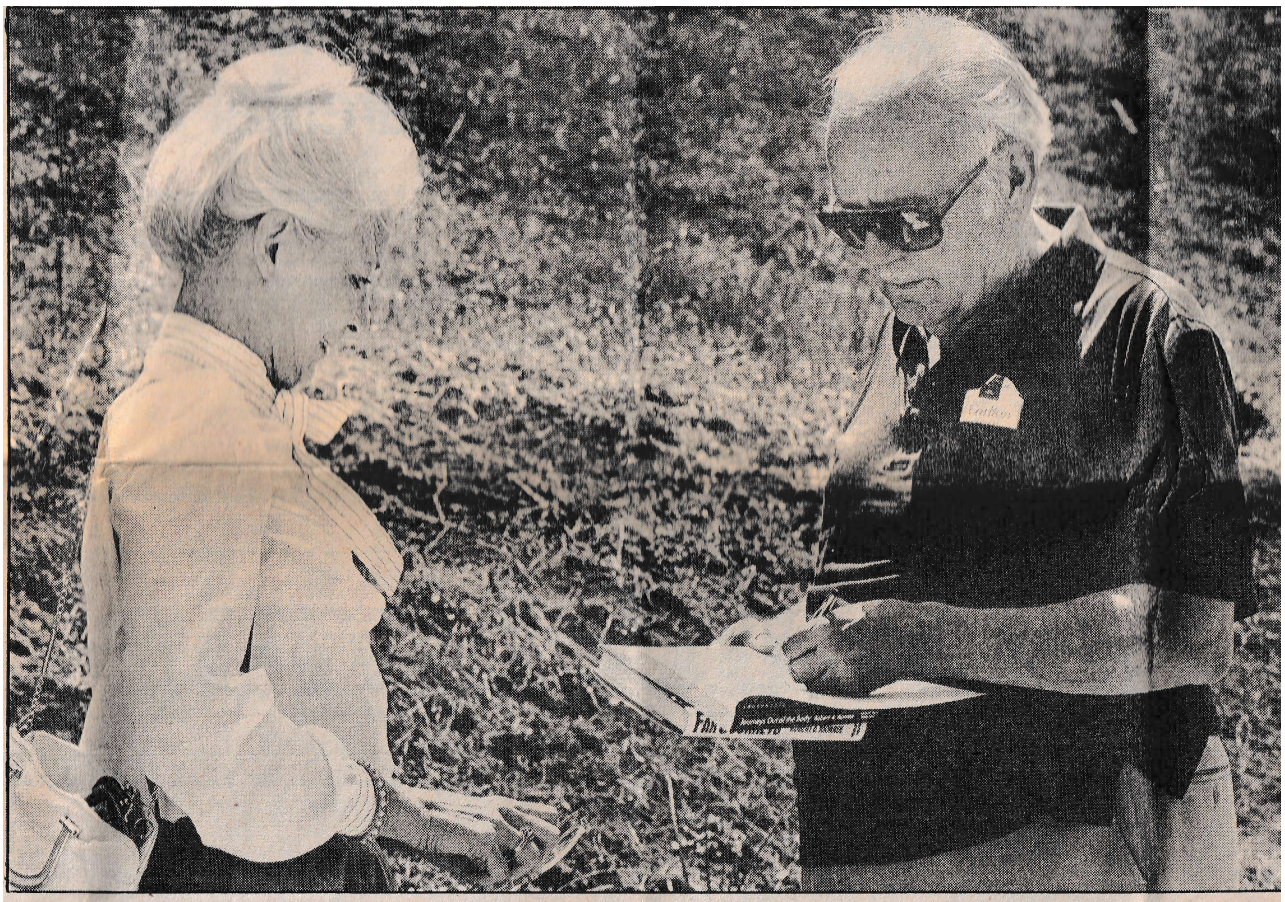
Robert Monroe wants "to change constructively man's direction and destiny."

THE WELL-TRAVELED MIND OF ROBERT MONROE

It has wandered the galaxy and touched the realm beyond time and space. In a matter of decades, says the founder of the Monroe Institute in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, we'll be able to do the same.

Our survival depends on it.





Monroe autographs his book, "Journeys Out of the Body," for a fan who simply drove up and asked.

Monroe and workmen study the plans for his mountaintop home and institute workshop.

Staff photos by ROBIE RAY

By MIKE D'ORSO
Staff writer

THE BLUE RIDGE forest shimmers in morning sunlight as Robert Monroe climbs behind the wheel of his black Subaru and points it up the mountain. A hawk swoops low over Lake Miranon, searching for bass. The sounds of saws and hammers echo from the woods as Monroe steers toward a ridge that marks the uppermost boundary of his 800-acre community.

"This is an easy place to fall in love with," he says, ticking off the names of his neighbors as he passes their tree-shrouded homes. Down that drive is mystery novelist Phyllis Whitney. Up that one is Joseph Chilton Pearce, author of "Magical Child." Steve Pauley, a math professor at Purdue University, has a home among these pines, as does Florida social services executive Sharon Alley. There are psychologists living in these woods. And computer programmers. And there's newcomer Eleanor Friede, who edited Richard Bach's "Jonathan Livingston Seagull."

Monroe likes to categorize the world in terms of hemispheres of the brain — the right side being the seat of intuition and creativity, the left being the source of logic and rationale. Here in his own back yard, an eclectic mixture of righties and lefties has come to live, all, he says, with one thing in common.

"All these people," pronounces Monroe, "in their own way are seekers after truth."

When this former radio and television executive talks of truth, he is not referring to anything found through textbooks or prayers or drugs. The truth he has found and toward which he guides others is approached through sleep, through gateways of the mind, through altered states of consciousness. Amid the physical splendor of the Blue Ridge foothills, Monroe and his laboratory entourage spend their days among wires, microphones and EEG monitors, journeying inward, putting their bodies to sleep while their minds wander, literally, across the universe.

For 28 years, Monroe has fiddled with electronically produced soundwaves, using them to trigger a release of the mind from the body, launching what are called out-of-body experiences — excursions of pure consciousness through and beyond time and space. More than 6,000 people have gone through the Monroe Institute's week-long programs of psychic exploration. Not all have had the pleasure of an OOBE, as they call the cosmic trip. Most, however, come away more attuned to the unused portions of their brains.

For those who cannot make it to the institute, Monroe's brain-tapping methods are available through a catalog of mail-order cassette tapes. No OOBEs are guaranteed, but the 90 tapes on the institute's menu do have their everyday uses. Rhode Island medical students use them to reduce anxiety at test time. Schoolteachers in Tacoma, Wash., use them to soothe, quiet and relax their first-graders. In Oak Ridge, Tenn., the tapes are used to reduce pain for surgery patients. The tapes also have been used to teach autistic children and to treat substance abuse patients.

It is these practical applications of his "hemi-sync" method — short for hemispheric synchronization — that Monroe is quick to emphasize make his work more than just another psychic parlor game, to be lumped with fire-walking or bending spoons.

"We think what we're doing here is much more to the point. We want to release all this from pure research to something usable, something valuable. I guess that's my left brain always asking 'How can we use it?' "

Somebody is using it. More than 22,000 of the institute's cassette tapes, which treat everything from insomnia to a shaky golf game, are sold through the mail each year.

But Robert Monroe is ultimately interested in more than ridding the world of bad sleep and bogeys. As his institute's glossy brochure describes it, Monroe wants nothing less than "to change constructively man's direction and destiny."

A cosmic breakthrough is at hand, says Monroe. In a matter of decades, he says, the planet will be peopled by men and women whose control of mind over matter will free them from the bonds of their skin and bones. And they will not need Monroe's labs or his tapes to unleash their mental powers.

"That's the crux of it all," says Monroe, parking at the top of the ridge and looking down on a hillside of blossoming dogwoods. "Man has a great opportunity in the next 50 years to break out of our boxes, to be something far more than we've ever been."

Right-brainers and mystics

He is an unlikely-looking new-age frontiersman, this paunchy, 70-year-old, white-haired, white-mustached father of six. Wearing sunglasses, blue sportshirt, khaki slacks and white bucks, he looks more like a gentle grandfather — which he is — than a mind-tripping guru.

But listen to him talk. Even in the most mundane, everyday conversation, Monroe tends to slip into laboratory lingo. A few examples from the morning outing:

After discussing the removal of some old farm machinery from a nearby field, he tells a worker, "Now that I have this information to process, I will let you know."

After haggling with a carpenter over the construction of his new ridge-top home and institute workshop, he sighs: "Carpenters are basically left-brained."

Before turning in for a quick, midday nap, he announces: "I'm going to go ahead upstairs and recycle."

Which is just what Monroe did that night in 1958 when he first spontaneously slipped out of his body and began joyriding the highways of inner and outer space. It was terrifying in the beginning, says Monroe, and it took him a year to convince himself he was not simply going out of his mind. It took him even longer — until the 1971 publication of his first book, "Journeys Out of the Body" — to tell the rest of the world about his experiences. In the meantime, he moved from New York to Virginia, where he established, headed, then sold his interest in the Charlottesville-based Jefferson Cable Corporation, and set up the Monroe Institute in rural Nelson County.

Before the book, he kept his cosmic consciousness in the closet: "In a left-brain world, as president of a major corporation, I didn't quite feel the board of directors or the stockholders would look favorably on a wild guy doing this sort of stuff."

After the book, he found he had plenty of company. More than 350,000 copies were sold, the book was printed in seven languages, and it established Monroe as more than a crackpot among the scientific community. It convinced death-and-dying expert Elizabeth Kubler-Ross to try Monroe's program and to incorporate life-after-death into her own research. Actor Jon Voight has also sampled the Monroe method.

A good number of backpackers still show up at the institute's four-building complex, but most program participants are scientists, psychologists and doctors from clinics and universities around the world — "as against the pure right-brainers and mystics," explains Monroe.

Monroe has lectured at the Smithsonian.

before the American Psychiatric Association. Both Mother Earth News and Omni magazine have analyzed the institute from their own divergent perspectives. Corporations have brought their executives to Monroe's hilltop headquarters for training in tapping the intuitive, creative, right-brain regions of their minds. A helicopter landing site is cleared in the weeds just beyond the institute's outdoor volleyball net.

Credibility is no longer a concern for Monroe. Nor is viability. After more than a decade of pumping his own money into the institute — "I'm not poor; I remember paying in a 90 percent tax bracket when there *was* a 90 percent tax bracket" — the operation paid for itself in 1984 and became a nonprofit organization last year. That freed Monroe to finish his second book, "Far Journeys," which was published last October. He'll be packing soon for a European trip promoting British and French editions of both books.

The institute, the books, the building — lately, Monroe has had a lot on his mind. Too much, in fact, to wander off to that region beyond the body. About 10 years ago, he tired of traveling through the space and time we all know. Leaving the body to sightsee on this or other planets, he says, soon became routine.

"It got old," says Monroe. "There's a certain sameness to it."

Hooking up with other consciousnesses — "I now have a lot of nonphysical friends" — he was guided to a realm beyond the time- and space-limited universe of our comprehension. It is these outer limits that are described in detail in "Far Journeys." After those outings, Monroe had no more interest in cosmic-sailing through the worlds of our comprehension.

"Why bother with local traffic," he asks, "when you can take the interstate?"

But even the "other reality system" he describes, where pure energy forms play God and create planets and solar systems just for kicks, is not enough to draw Monroe out of his body these days.

"I've ceased to do this for my own self," he says. He explains that he's got all the information his mind can "process" in this body. He's got several more books' worth of experiences yet to sort out. So he is leaving it to the institute's volunteer "explorers" to continue bringing back data while he distills it and answers for others the questions he spent 10 years answering for himself.

Hooky in the hereafter

The question Monroe is most often asked is how he knows these excursions are real and not simply dreams?

"It took me a full year to collect hard-core evidence, to validate that for myself," he says. The evidence ranged from traveling in a nonphysical form to distant friends' homes at preassigned times and later reporting correctly the things he saw, to pinching neighbors in their sleep and seeing the black-and-blue marks the next day.

Which raises another question: Can shimmering forms of pure consciousness have physical properties?

Absolutely, says Monroe, describing two psychiatrists who were lovers but who lived and worked in distant cities. After spending a week at the institute, they asked Monroe to help them rendezvous sexually in their out-of-body state.

"I did," smiles Monroe, "and it worked beautifully. They met halfway between Kansas City and Denver every night."

With all these minds meeting minds and minds meeting bodies, isn't there the danger of misuse? What about governments using the method for brainwashing or spying? What about the threat of cosmic rapists

hovering through the bedrooms of the world?

Monroe shakes his head, wearing the patient smile of a man who's heard it all before.

"To be efficient at this," he says, "you have to develop an overview. With that overview, you are no longer interested in the things of this body-ruled world. You lose a sense of the body self, of local customs, of nationality. What we call morality changes radically. What's important and not important changes dramatically."

The zone beyond, which Monroe describes as a realm of deep blackness, bright lights and exquisite joy, sounds much like what some religions might call heaven or nirvana. And Monroe admits it's hard to explain why anyone who has gotten there would ever come back. Why don't all those sleeping bodies lying in the institute's darkened cubicles remain vacant, deserted forever by consciousnesses playing hooky in the hereafter?

"You'd be surprised at the attachment we have to the physical body," says Monroe. "It's addictive. As long as you have that body, the attachment is still strong. You have an urgency to get back."

The call to return to the body, notes Monroe, is not always a deep philosophical or psychological one.

"Ninety percent of the time," he smiles, "it's a full bladder."

Nuclear snowballs

Lunchtime, and Monroe drives down the mountain to the nearby town of Nellysford for a cafe lunch and more questions. Over a burger, fries and ice tea, he talks about the past, the future and other lives.

"Never mind religious beliefs, or whether you've been a bad boy or a good boy," he says of life beyond death. "You're going to survive physical death whether you like it or believe it or not. It's a fact."

We have all been in other bodies in the past, says Monroe, and we will all be in other bodies in the future. Each consciousness is eternal, he says, while bodies come and go. The catch, he notes, is that when we're out of the bodies, we can't wait to get back, but while we're in these bodies, we are unaware that there is anything beyond.

"While you're here, you forget you were ever anything but human," says Monroe. "You forget where you came from."

And that, Monroe admits, begs the million-dollar question: Where did we come from? Who or what set up and guides this system, this planet, this universe?

Monroe nods and fingers a fry.

"Just somebody having some fun," he says.

Somebody?

"Some intelligent energy field."

Energy field?

"An energy being. Something the average human would call God, but it wasn't God."

What it was, says Monroe, was one of many consciousnesses permanently unhooked from the cycle of death and life as a human.

"There are graduates from this school of compressed learning we call Earth who are doing this in other places," he says. "It's a lot of fun, creating species, weaving just the right delicate balances for life on a planet."

Monroe knows how much fun it can be, he says, because he has seen it.

"Just a small demonstration," he says of the energy-being who escorted him during one of his OOBEs. The being, says Monroe, created a solar system for Monroe's viewing pleasure.

"It was as if someone was making it snow, and creating snowballs, and tossing them out like fiery suns, as it were. Nuclear snowballs. Just having fun."

It was, in fact, just fun and games, says Monroe, that got the whole ball rolling here on Earth. The consciousness that created Earth, says Monroe, began tinkering with its toy, decided to try out its creation firsthand, in human form, and things soon got out of hand.

"To really feel how it is, it had to get down into it. Only it didn't figure on the addiction of life as a human. It thought it was in for a quick shot and out. But things didn't happen that way."

So all this is a result of an accident, of a great cosmic mistake?

"Not a mistake," says Monroe, finishing his tea. "An experiment."

Previous lives

Back at the institute office, Monroe climbs out of his car as another vehicle comes up the drive. A woman hops out, clutching a copy of his latest book. She corners Monroe, gets his autograph and drives away as Monroe heads upstairs to recycle.

Monroe's daughter Nancy, the institute's administrator, is downstairs, doing paperwork to the sound of a faint hum coming from a pair of speakers on her desk. The tape is called "Concentration," one of the institute's better sellers.

"I can concentrate anytime I want," says Nancy. "But I happen to be lazy, so I put a tape on."

Nancy, 33, says she has been having OOBEs since she was 16. But unlike her father's, her control is shaky. During one experiment, she slipped into an out-of-body state, and Monroe asked her to explore the "intervals between lives." Instead she slipped in and out of episodes in what she says were her previous lives — as a man about to be hanged, as a woman about to be executed and as a soldier inside a tank about to be blown up.

Asked why the experiment took her to moments of imminent death instead of post-death limbo, Nancy shrugs and smiles: "I kept missing."

Nancy has worked for her father since 1974, after graduating from college and studying Zen philosophy in Japan. She and her husband, Joseph McMoneagle, a former Army warrant officer who now heads a consulting company called Intuitive Intelligence Applications, live just down the road. Monroe and his wife, Nancy, live upstairs, "over the store," as Monroe puts it.

The office is busy, with several of the 14 staffers handling the correspondence generated by sales of the institute's assorted programs and products. The room also houses the only Xerox machine for miles around,

and that's what brings Eleanor Friede through the door.

Friede still has a home and office in Manhattan, where she edits and publishes books, always on the lookout for another "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." But since Christmas, when she moved into her new home on the institute's property, she's been shifting much of her work and time here.

"I was simply curious," she says when asked why she signed up for a week-long institute program in 1982. The week, she says, was worth the $850 price tag.

"I just was more aware. It didn't change my direction, but it made it clearer that I had to get away from the distractions, noise and dirt of New York. Now I've found I can have it both ways."

And now that she's here, Friede says it will be only a matter of time before she moves from relaxation tapes to exploring life beyond the body.

"I have a feeling that's why I'm here," she says. "I want to know how far we can go, to learn more about the universe we live in."

Synthesizing death

Fully recycled, Monroe spends the afternoon giving a tour of the institute buildings, checking again on the mountaintop construction and explaining why he believes mankind is reaching what he calls "critical mass" in terms of the pressures on our collective consciousnesses. The threat of nuclear war, environmental holocausts and the latest specter of terrorism, says Monroe, are actually pushing people toward the same kinds of discoveries he has been making in his laboratory for years.

"As anxiety levels rise worldwide," he explains, "as the rules and the game change, consciousness evolves to deal with all this.

"The consciousness that can cope," he goes on, "is the developing consciousness. If man does not learn and pass this test and move to a more mature consciousness, entropy will set in and man will no longer be the dominant species on this planet."

Which, notes Monroe, would be no great disaster.

"The future of man on earth," he says, "is an interesting, but relative term. If this compressed learning school that is human existence on Earth goes down the tubes, there are others."

Man, however, will not go the way of the dinosaur, says Monroe. And he speaks from more than faith. He says he has seen the future, he has been there, although he will only describe it in sketchy terms.

Nuclear war, for example, will not occur, says Monroe, at least not on a global scale: "There will be contamination, but not from bombs nuking all over the place. The contamination will be astronomical."

People will be able to control their bodies, says Monroe, to the point where a handful of rice will provide sufficient calories for an entire day. In time, a kernel will suffice. Then, no food at all will be needed: "It's just a matter of stages."

Communication, he says, will be nonverbal, requiring neither voices nor ears: "Mind to mind connection in its purest sense."

The aim of all this development, says Monroe, and the object of his work at the moment, is erasing the fear of death.

"the fun begins."

Part of his fun at the moment is conducting death-simulation experiments in his laboratory, and drafting a third book on what he calls "the ultimate frontier, the greatest unknown of all" — death.

Using the same hemi-sync methods that launch his explorers on OOBEs, Monroe and his staff are placing volunteers in a consciousness-free state in which they lower their own blood pressure, body temperature and pulse rate, "synthesizing death in slow motion, as it were," says Monroe.

"We in essence reel them out close to death, pulling away all the mystical, superstitious trappings and trying to cross through the fears to what it's all about."

There is no danger in the experiments, he says: "We can bring them back in instantly." And there is no possibility that death may look attractive after a close look: "It doesn't mean you want to die; you're just not afraid of it."

In all his cosmic excursions, Monroe says he has avoided seeing how he will die at the end of this lifetime: "I don't want to spoil the fun."

All things, he says, come with time. Eventually, we will all "achieve escape velocity" and "go home, where we came from."

Now and in the end, says Monroe, we are all in essence God. "But you've forgotten what you are. This heavy physical life experience has blotted it out."

Monroe has been on both sides. The reason he is still here, "hanging around," as he puts it, are the simple pleasures of life, the "addictions," that for him include composing music, eating fresh trout and "occasionally playing a good game of cards."

No out-of-body peeks at someone else's hand, of course. In all the games we play, says Monroe, cosmic or otherwise, there is really no way to break the rules. No steps can be skipped. No lives left unlived. Each hand is played out all the way.

And the dealer?

"Something's driving," says Monroe, watching the sun set over his ridge, "but it's not the God of our childhood."